PITTA

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FIELD TRIP: Details will be announced on email

An Encomium to the Iora

Sudhir K

A sweet short whistle brings a smile to my face
A flash of black and yellow, flitters across the foliage
Hopping around at a hectic pace
Finally catch a glimpse of the sweet rascal

Donning a Bright yellow vest
The wings are black and so is the back
Filled with so much zeal and zest
A couple of brush strokes of white

Slashed across the wings that adds some flair
Come monsoon and the gentleman adorns an elegant black cap
To woo the ladies with a puffed-up flip in the air
Common Iora is the name and hunting eight-legged spinners and sundry is the game

My day is seldom complete
Without a visit from these sunlit golden nuggets
Their whistling to my ears is music so sweet
This my friends is my ode to the *Aegithina tiphia*

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SIGHTING OF THE WHITE-BELLIED HERON – A DREAM COME TRUE

Bhutan, April 20, 2026

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

A view of the river

We, a group of ten from Chennai, went on a birding trip to Bhutan recently. It was a great trip, and gave us a pretty huge list of ~260 bird species recorded. There were many highlights, including the Ward's Trogon, Solitary Snipe, pheasants like Satyr Tragopan, Blood Pheasant, Hill Partridge, Himalayan Monal and Kalij Pheasant, ten raptor species, 5 owls, 8 cuckoos (including the Asian Emerald Cuckoo), 4 parrotbills, and many finches, rosefinches and bullfinches, sunbirds, tits, yuhinas, and so on.

The undisputed star of the trip, however, was the White-bellied Heron.

Also known as the Imperial Heron or Great White-bellied Heron, it is one of the rarest birds on Earth, with the world population estimated at less than 250 mature individuals (as per IUCN Red List), although a recent Yale Tropical Resources Institute study put the number at a much more critical number – less than 70 birds. Of which, Bhutan holds a population of around 29-30 birds. And though the Royal Society for Protection of Nature runs an intense community-led conservation program for this heron in Bhutan, it is safe to say, sadly, that it is a species on the brink of extinction.

To see the White-bellied Heron had been a long-nurtured dream of mine. In 20 years of birding, I had never managed to see this bird. So, when we heard of a location where a nesting pair had been seen, just a couple of days before our Bhutan trip, I was excited at the possibility of finally seeing it.

The location was quite far, though, and not even on our itinerary. However, personally I was willing to give up the entire trip – well, almost! – to go and see this bird. And fortunately, the rest of the group was in complete agreement. So we made some changes in our itinerary, cut short our stay in Paro by one day, moved to Thimphu a day earlier, and off we went. It was a long drive – around four hours on mountain roads is no laughing matter – but we started early and made good time.

Finally arriving at the location, we got our first shock when we were told that we had to climb down the hillside around 500 metres. Climbing down was fine – the real worry was climbing back up again!

Anyway, in the spirit of "anything for the White-bellied Heron", we climbed down – the distance turned out to be around 30 metres, rather than 500! – maybe it was the guide's way of mentally preparing us.

At the spot, we were given another minor heart attack when, after a quick scan of the trees, the local guide said he could not see the bird. We began to wonder if it was going to be all in vain – the proverbial slip between the cup and the lip.

To give you an idea of the place – it was not like the 'heron sitting on a bare tree' sites where we usually see our Grey Herons and Openbills and Painted Storks nesting. This spot was on the side of a hill, and we were looking at a forest containing what seemed like a million trees, across a river, and possibly a hundred metres below our line of sight. Not easy, to put it mildly.

The location

After a few minutes of desperate scanning by all of us, through a variety of binoculars and cameras, the guide called out, "There it is!" – and we all breathed again.

A clamour of "Where? Where?" broke out. The local guide pointed out the nest to us. Well, he tried, anyway. But it took a minute – that felt like an hour – before I could finally locate it. I heaved a heartfelt sigh – happiness, relief all rolled into one. It is a fairly unremarkable-looking bird, but its extreme rarity, I suppose, lends it an aura that is larger than life.

Birder-photographers seem to have many categories of Lifers. There is:

The first time I saw it;
The first time I saw it **well**;
The first time I photographed it;
The first time I got a **good** photo; and even
The first time I got a photo with **this** camera and lens!

For a birder, life is much simpler. "I saw it" is enough. Of course, each individual is different. For me, I was happy to see the White-bellied Heron well through my binocs. But I did want a photograph. Good photograph. It was a watershed moment for me, after all. So I took a quick few photographs before trying to help others locate the nest – and was over-the-moon thrilled when I saw that I had managed to capture the chick also, standing tall and cuddling up to its parent!

White-bellied Heron and chick

One of my pet peeves is that most birders are not very good at explaining a location. I have heard, so many times, people say things like:

"It is on that tree" – in the middle of a forest;
"It is right in front" – well, naturally;
"It is in the gap between those branches" – when you don't even know which tree;

And the worst, most aggravating, exasperating one of all – "Look where I am looking!"

It should not be so difficult to pick a reference point – puddle, rock, yellow flowers, whatever – and go "ten o'clock from there, around 15-20 feet".

A couple of others had found the bird by now, but several hadn't, yet. I managed to help a few members of the group locate it.

Meanwhile, the guides had set up a spotting scope – thank God! – and found the nest, so we all took turns and saw the bird and the chick to our hearts' content. Well, not exactly, but you know what I mean.

Some of us took digiscoped photos and videos with our mobile phones through the scope. Those of us who had camera gear took photos with the cameras. And some of us just watched the birds.

A few minutes later, the chick seemed to lie down and go back to sleep. That is when the adult bird put back its wing – and I realised that the adult had been shielding the chick from the sun all this while. And we saw exactly why this bird is called White-bellied!

The chick goes back to sleep

We saw a Mountain Hawk Eagle lazily circle around and then go and perch on one of the trees a little distance away. And were suddenly worried for the welfare of the chick – Mountain Hawk Eagles are known to predate small birds, especially chicks. However, we trusted in the ability of the parents to fight off such threats.

Mountain Hawk Eagle

The earlier group had seen a pair of adults, and the guide told us that they seemed to be taking turns – one would go to feed while the other guarded the nest and the chick – and the cycle seemed to be around 3-4 hours. Given the distance we had to travel, it seemed difficult for us to wait for the shift change, but we did hang around for about an hour, hoping to see the other adult return.

After that period, though, with no other bird in sight, we decided to get back to base.

It was a bittersweet moment. We were happy to have seen the White-bellied Heron – and with a chick which, to me, is always a sign of hope for the future. However, we also knew how precarious its current position is, and wondered if we would ever get to see it again.

Habitat loss, human disturbance, and the destruction of breeding sites are said to be the prime threats faced by the White-bellied Heron. All are human-originated – I wondered if we, as a species, will allow any species to survive. We can only hope and pray that at least the captive breeding program succeeds in restoring its population to some degree of health. Not an easy road – but what else have we got?

A view of the other side of the river

[*Editor's Note:* Generally nest photos are not allowed in most birding groups, due to the potential risks to the bird. However, in this case, an exception is being made by the Editor due to the extreme rarity of the bird, which the group was able to sight in a very remote location only with the help of a local guide, and also since an egg from the clutch had already been removed by the Department of Forests and Park Services of Bhutan for the captive breeding programme, establishing prior human intervention.]

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Bird Humour

Umesh Mani

(Received on WhatsApp, July 18, 2023)

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Sarus Crane (*Antigone antigone*)

Sarus Crane Male (L), Immature (C) and Female (R)
(Nalsarovar, Gujarat, January 2, 2026)

Order:	Gruiformes
Family:	Gruidae
Genus:	*Antigone*
Species:	*A. antigone*
Size:	156-180 cm
IUCN Status:	Vulnerable

Description & distribution: The Sarus Crane is a large, non-migratory crane found in parts of the Indian sub-continent and South-east Asia, including Pakistan, India, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and China. In India, the Sarus Crane is primarily found in the lowlands, including the Gangetic plains, and west to coastal Gujarat, south to Godavari river, and east to West Bengal and Assam (although it is quite rare from Bihar eastwards).They were also once present in Thailand and the Philippines, but those populations are now considered locally extinct. Besides, there is a small population present in the north-eastern parts of Australia, where it is partially migratory. While the global population is under pressure, in some areas it seems to be doing well due to increase in the areas under paddy cultivation.

The Sarus Crane is mostly grey overall, with only the bare red head, collar and nape standing out. It has a greyish crown, grey ear patch, long and pointed greenish-grey bill, whitish neck, long pink legs and orange-red irises. In breeding season, the red around the head and neck becomes brighter. The sexes are alike, although the male is noticeably taller than the female. Juvenile birds show a yellowish base to the bill and a fully feathered brown-grey head. Males in the Indian population can reach up to 180 cm in height, making them the world's tallest extant flying birds.

Habitat & behaviour: The Sarus Crane is a resident breeder across most of its range, and prefers open shallow wetlands, uncultivated areas or irrigated paddy and wheat fields. Numbers seem to increase as the size of the wetlands increase. In Australia, non-breeding birds have been seen to forage in areas with intensive agriculture and smaller patches of cattle-grazing areas, where they were observed feeding on grain, nuts and insects. Unlike most cranes, the Sarus Crane is mainly non-migratory.

Breeding pairs are strongly territorial, and may defend their territories with a range of calls and displays. Paired birds are known to utter calls in unison (duets), either at the edge of their territories, or on the nest where they are incubating. Very rarely, they are known to allow a third member and utter calls together (triets) – this is believed to help improve breeding success rate as the third member may also help in raising the chicks. In the non-breeding season, though, the Sarus Crane is fairly social, and may be seen in groups ranging from a few birds to as large as a couple of hundreds – the largest flock ever recorded was 430 birds from Keoladeo National Park (aka Bharatpur).

The Sarus Crane is omnivorous, and its diet consists mainly of insects (especially grasshoppers), aquatic plants, fish, frogs, crustaceans, and seeds. It may also, occasionally, take larger vertebrate prey like water snakes or the eggs of birds and turtles. There are also two published records of the Sarus Crane

hunting and feeding on chicks of the Grey-headed Swamphen. Plant matter eaten includes tubers, corms of aquatic plants, grass shoots as well as seeds and grains from cultivated crops such as peanuts and cereal crops such as rice. Its flight is slow and ponderous, with slow rhythmical wingbeats, rarely very high up in the air. The call is a loud trumpeting, uttered from the ground as well as in flight.

Nesting: The Sarus Crane breeds mainly between July and December. The nest is a large mass of reeds, stems and straw in the middle of a flooded field or marsh. The usual clutch consists of two eggs, pale greenish or pinkish white, sometimes spotted or blotched brown or purple.

Local name: The Sarus Crane is known as *'Saras'* or *'Sarus'* in Hindi, Punjabi and Marathi, *'Sarasu konga'* in Telugu, *'Bharat sarus'* in Sanskrit, *'Khur sang'* in Assamese, and *'Woinu'* or *'Woinuren'* in Manipuri.

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For information, write to: Deccan Birders, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500034. **Website:** www.deccanbirders.in. **E-group:** http://groups.google.co.in/group/deccanbirders. **Society membership** (in Rs.): Annual: 500 per annum; Student: 200 per annum; Corporate: 2000 per annum; Life: 3000. (*Add Rs 75 for outstation cheques.)*